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SUBJECT: REVISING HISTORY: NEW ROK HISTORY TEXTBOOK

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Starting from this spring, South Korean high school students will learn their history from a revised text of their familiar "A Modern and Contemporary History of Korea." The movement to revise the history text kicked off soon after the inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak, spearheaded by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) in its official request to six publishing companies. Amid noisy political debate, changes were made late last year, in time for the March 2009 start of the school year. The new textbooks feature a cumulative total of 206 revised passages, many now aligned with more moderate, center-right historical views. The Allied victory over Japan is no longer characterized as having been an "obstacle" to Korean unification, for example, and a reference to the U.S. Army as an "occupying force" has been removed. North Korea is portrayed less sympathetically than before, with blame for the DPRK's anemic economy and strained inter-peninsular and international relations placed squarely on Pyongyang's economic policies and weapons programs. National Assembly opposition lawmakers, textbook authors, and history scholars have criticized the revisions process as motivated by politics rather than based on scholarship, guaranteeing that this is not the last revision, just another chapter in the continuing saga that is Korea history. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (SBU) All Korean schools rely on government approved textbooks, which is why the textbooks -- especially those for history classes -- are mired in the politics and "political correctness" of the day. In 2003, under the Roh Moo-hyun Administration, the ROK Ministry of Education expanded the number of approved publishers of the high school textbook, "A Modern and Contemporary History of Korea," from one to six. Enabling schools to choose from several versions of the text, the move was ostensibly designed to promote diversity in historical views. The new textbooks immediately drew criticism from conservatives, however, and became a flashpoint in the larger Korean debate over how to appraise past leaders such as Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee and the history of Korea's relationship with the United States.

¶3. (SBU) Conservatives argued that the textbooks were biased toward a leftist view of Korean history, over-emphasizing its darker chapters, such as collaboration with Japanese colonialists, and exaggerating the nationalist elements of North Korea. The texts inspired a "masochistic" view of the ROK, belittled the role of the Allied forces in Korea's liberation from Japan, ascribed imperialist motives to U.S. involvement on the Korean Peninsula, and dwelled on the

faults of South Korean dictators while slighting their achievements, according to South Korean conservatives. An influential group of critics, the Textbook Forum, went so far as to argue that the textbooks were teaching a patricidal history, encouraging the view that the ROK as a country should never have existed.

Enter LMB

¶4. (SBU) President Lee Myung-bak's inauguration in February 2008 meant that the conservative critics were now in charge.

Following then-Education Minister Kim Doh-yeon's critical remarks about the "left-leaning" texts in May 2008, Prime Minister Han Seung-soo called for implementation of a revision process with input from ROKG agencies other than the Education Ministry. In response, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) recommended that a depiction of the first ROK president Syngman Rhee as one who "ruthlessly suppressed dissent in the name of anti-Communism and exploited the North Korean threat to shore up his dictatorial regime" be replaced with "a president who contributed to the nation's modernization." The Ministry of Unification (MOU) supported the removal of language characterizing Kim Dae-jung's ascent to the presidency as an ousting of the conservative establishment and the installing of former dissidents to positions of power; this would be replaced by a portrayal emphasizing reconciliation and cooperation under Kim Dae-jung.

¶5. (SBU) It was thus with full support from President Lee's conservative constituents as well as certain quarters of the ROKG itself that -- following testy National Assembly discussions on the topic in October 2008 -- MEST requested the six publishers -- Kumsung Publishing, Doosan, Bubmunsa, Joongang Institute for Better Education, Chunjae Education, and Daehan -- make revisions to their respective versions of "A Modern and Contemporary History of Korea." The MEST revisions committee directed the publishers i to revise a cumulative total of 53 passages in four of the six textbook versions. Additional revisions initiated by the publishing companies followed, as did another set of directions from the committee in November. In the end, the total number of revisions in all six texts grew to 206. Of these, the publishers initiated 102 and the revisions committee recommended 104. Of the 104 recommended by the committee, 47 were directed at a single publisher, Kumsung.

Allied Victory: Not so Bad for Reunification

¶6. (SBU) Publication of the revised textbooks for the new school year beginning in March 2009 revealed changes of emphasis more in line with a moderate, center-right view. Whereas before the Kumsung text had portrayed the role of the Allied victory over Japan and the subsequent liberation of Korea as an "obstacle" to the building of the kind of new nation "desired by our people," its new language attributes the inability of Koreans of that period to "take the initiative in building a unified nation" to the "failure to defeat the Japanese on our own." Doosan likewise removed from its text language characterizing the Allied victory as the "reason" liberation "did not directly result in the establishment of a unified independent state for our people."

¶7. (SBU) The shift rightward is also in evidence in accounts of the post-Korean War period. Armed guerilla forces that hid in the Jiri Mountains, for example, are no longer called "pro-North Korea" by Kumsung; they are "leftist." While the Kumsung text acknowledges that some U.S. agricultural assistance was diverted to fund political activity under the Syngman Rhee government, it no longer implies that Rhee deliberately imported excess U.S. aid for such purposes. The Daehan text, previously faulting the Chang Myeon administration for not making "active efforts to engage in dialogue with the North" in support of a UN-monitored

North-South general election, now neutrally states "dialogue with the North did not take place."

U.S. Army an Occupying Force No More

¶8. (SBU) New neutral language extends to descriptions of past U.S. involvement in Korea, too. A caption beneath a photo in the Kumsung text of participants in a U.S.-USSR Joint Commission on Korea meeting at Deoksugung Palace in Seoul identified Lieutenant General John R. Hodge as "commander of the U.S. occupying forces" before; now he is simply a "Commission member."

----- North Korea an Object neither of Sympathy nor Admiration -----

¶9. (SBU) Removed from the new texts or significantly altered are a number of descriptions and features that cast the North Korean regime in a somewhat sympathetic light. A photo of Kim Il Sung was deleted from the Doosan text, for example. Post-June 15, 2000 Inter-Korean Summit family reunion data was also scrubbed from the Kumsung text. Doosan descriptions of the North-South family reunions were replaced with language on the activities of South Korean companies in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), President Roh Moo-hyun's October 2007 meeting with "National Defense Commission (NDC) Chairman Kim Jong Il" in Pyongyang, and President Lee's new North Korea policy. Previous Chunjae Education wording suggesting that North Korea had maintained cultural traditions more faithfully than the South has been modified to emphasize the closed nature of North Korean society. A humanizing, if fictional, portrayal of a North Korean student in the Kumsung text was replaced with a factual description of limited options open to North Korean youths upon completion of compulsory schooling. A sentence linking the lots of both North and South Korea ("At present, South and North Korea face many military threats ... foreign interference is likely.") was removed from the Joongang text.

¶10. (SBU) New language also shifts emphasis from North Korea's humanitarian tragedies to the failed economic policies that caused them. A new sentence added to the Bubmunsa text, for example, states that despite the introduction of new measures to boost economic activity in 2002, "North Korea's economic situation is presently getting worse." "The North Korean economy, even of late, has not seen any growth," affirms Doosan. Elsewhere, the Kumsung text notes that the Tumen River Area Development Program "has, in effect, been suspended due to lack of investment."

----- DPRK to Blame for Nuclear Tensions, Isolation -----

¶11. (SBU) In contrast to previous texts' references to "suspicions raised in the international community" about North Korea's nuclear weapons development, the new textbooks describe the existence of DPRK nuclear and missile programs in unambiguous terms, placing responsibility for North Korea's strained inter-peninsular and international relations squarely on Pyongyang. Before, the Doosan text noted "suspicions" about North Korean WMD programs; now it states matter-of-factly that "North Korea is developing weapons of mass destruction, including biological and chemical weapons, and is thus threatening the stability of the Korean Peninsula and international peace." A new sentence added to the Kumsung text states: "By announcing its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and unilaterally announcing its possession of nuclear weapons, North Korea raised insecurity and tension on the Korean Peninsula and in the international community." Both the Bubmunsa and Doosan textbooks now attribute lack of improvement in U.S.-North Korea relations to North Korean nuclear weapons development, rather than mere "suspicions" about the DPRK program. Furthermore, Doosan language suggesting normalization of

North Korea's relations with the U.S. and Japan would pave the way to peace and reunification has been replaced with a description of the Six-Party Talks as an effort "to resolve the North Korea nuclear issue." On past North-South tensions, the new Chunjae text states, "North Korea's terrorist actions had fatal effects on inter-Korean relations."

Resistance from National Assembly Opposition, Textbook Authors

¶12. (SBU) Implementation of textbook revision has not occurred without controversy. The issue was the subject of heated discussion during a National Assembly audit in October 2008, with opposition Democratic Party members arguing the changes were driven by political motives rather than scholarship. One publisher (Kumsung) complained of undue pressure from MEST and initially balked at making some of the Ministry-requested revisions, though it later backed down. Holding out the longest were textbook authors, with support from history teachers and scholars. The authors of five of the six publishers' textbooks (all but Doosan's) issued a joint statement in December 2008 asserting that "having a publisher unilaterally change the contents of a book that will have the name of the author printed on it ... violates copyright law and undermines the author's honor." In response to one of numerous legal actions taken by the authors in an attempt to block publication of the new texts, the Seoul Central District Court noted in January that both the publishers and authors had "agreed to sincerely fulfill the orders of the Education Minister when they applied for government approval of the textbooks." The right-leaning Korea Economic Daily noted that the textbook changes were implemented in response to revisions that took place under previous progressive administrations, including, for example, accounts of democracy movement events in the 1980's; progressive critics and academics lamented the politicization of the issue.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Of course, this is not the final word, because nobody ever has the final word on what happened in history, especially in Korea. This round the conservatives have won because one of their own is in the Blue House. One beneficiary of the latest revisions is the United States. The characterization of the U.S. is less calculating and less "imperial" than before. Undoubtedly, however, all of this will be revised again when the political winds next shift.

Selected Textbook Passage Revisions

¶14. (U) The previous and revised text of selected passages from the six publishers' respective versions of "A Modern and Contemporary History of Korea" follows:

Kumsung

Previous: The fact that our independence was achieved by means of the Allied victory proved to be an obstacle to building a new state that was desired by our people.

Revised: The failure to defeat the Japanese on our own was the cause for why we could not take the initiative in building a unified nation-state.

Previous: As a result, there was almost no punishment of those who had collaborated with the Japanese, and efforts to start a new country that was founded on the national spirit were wasted.

Revised: As a result, efforts to reestablish the national spirit by punishing those who had collaborated with the

Japanese ended without any results.

Previous: Throughout South Korea, including the Jiri Mountains, the activities of pro-North Korea armed guerilla forces continued.

Revised: Throughout South Korea, including the Jiri Mountains, the activities of leftist armed guerilla forces continued.

Previous:

Hopes of North Korean Youth

Character 4: "I am a student studying in the honors class at a middle school in Hamheung. I want to enter Kim Il Sung University and become a party or government official."

Revised: Deleted Character 4. Instead added the following explanation:

After graduating from middle school, students in North Korea follow one of the three career paths: entering a university, enlisting in the military or receiving a workplace assignment. Most students enlist in the military or get assigned a job, and only 10 percent of students enter the university right after graduating. There are some students who enter the university with recommendations from their workplaces or the military. Workplaces are assigned irrespective of the student's wishes.

Previous: In the early 1990s, suspicions were raised in the international community that North Korea, which had been burdened by huge military costs, was developing nuclear weapons.

Revised: Added supplementary paragraph:

North Korea's Development of Nuclear Weapons: By announcing its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and unilaterally announcing its possession of nuclear weapons, North Korea raised insecurity and tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in the international community.

Previous: In order to supplement a deficient budget and secure political funds, the Syngman Rhee government imported more U.S. agricultural aid than was actually needed.

Revised: In order to supplement a deficient budget, the Syngman Rhee government imported U.S. agricultural aid, some of which was used as political funds.

Previous: As part of the Tumen River Area Development Program (TRADP), North Korea designated the Rajin-Sonbong area as a special economic trade zone. The Tumen River Area Development Program (TRADP) was a large-scale development project that aimed to connect Chungjin (North Korea), Yangji and Hunchun (China), and Vladivostok (Russia), and included the participation of related countries (North Korea, China and Russia) and neighboring countries.

Revised: North Korea designated the Rajin-Sonbong area as a special economic trade zone in 1991 as part of the Tumen River Area Development Program (TRADP), which it was pursuing with China and Russia. The plan was to construct this area as a center for international trade, finance and tourism between 1993 and 2010. As of 2008, however, the project has, in effect, been suspended due to the lack of investment.

Deleted: Family reunion data.

Previous: U.S. economic aid to South Korea had the purpose of making South Korea a bulwark against communism.

Revised: The important purpose of U.S. economic aid was to make South Korea a bulwark against communism.

Caption for photo of participants talking before a U.S.-USSR Joint Commission on Korea meeting at Deoksugung Palace:

Previous: "Commander of the U.S. occupying forces Lieutenant General Hodge"

Revised: "U.S. Commission member Lieutenant General Hodge"

Doosan

Previous: On August 15, 1945, as a result of the continuous struggle for independence, our people were finally able to come out from Japan's colonial rule and achieve independence. The August 15 Liberation, however, had also been achieved through the Allied victory in World War II and Japan's subsequent defeat. For this reason, the August 15 Liberation did not directly result in the establishment of a unified independent state for our people.

Revised: With the Allied victory in World War II, our people achieved independence on August 15, 1945. The August 15 Liberation was also the result of our people's continuous struggle for independence. The August 15 Liberation, however, did not directly result in the establishment of a unified independent state for our people.

Previous: There were even suspicions that North Korea was developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

Revised: In addition, North Korea is developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including biological and chemical weapons, and is thus threatening the stability of the Korean Peninsula and international peace.

Previous: The food shortage in North Korea is serious and still persists despite humanitarian aid to the country from international organizations during the past three years. Furthermore, the North Korean economy has not seen any growth for the past ten years and economic difficulties persist.

Revised: The food shortage in North Korea is serious and still persists despite humanitarian aid to the country from international organizations since 1995. Furthermore, the North Korean economy, even of late, has not seen any growth and economic difficulties persist.

Previous: One hundred separated family members that had participated in past reunion events were selected respectively from each side and took part in another round of reunions in Seoul and Pyongyang. In December, the North and South had also selected one hundred separated family members from each side for another round of reunions for families that had participated in past reunion events.

Revised: Recently, some South Korean companies have moved into the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) -- which North Korea had established as a special economic zone -- and are carrying out their production activities inside the complex. In October 2007, President Roh Moo-hyun visited Pyongyang to meet with National Defense Commission (NDC) Chairman Kim Jong Il for the October 4 summit. The Lee Myung-bak administration, which came into office in 2008, announced that it would pursue a policy of "Mutual Benefits and Common Prosperity" with North Korea.

Previous: Although North Korea and the U.S. are looking for ways to improve relations, there has been poor progress due to suspicions about North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and the missile launch issue. Negotiations on

normalizing relations between North Korea and Japan have also made no progress and the talks have been slow. If in the future North Korea normalizes and improves its relations with the U.S. and Japan, this will help establish peace on the Korean Peninsula and form the basis for reunification.

Revised: Although North Korea and the U.S. are looking for ways to improve relations, there has been poor progress due to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and the missile launch issue. Efforts to resolve the North Korea nuclear issue are being made at the Six Party Talks (South Korea, North Korea, U.S., China, Japan, Russia), which started in 2003 with the mediation of China. Recently, there have been indications of improvement in North Korea-U.S. relations with the North declaring its nuclear activities and destroying the cooling tower at the reactor in Yongbyon.

Deleted: Photo of Kim Il-sung, p. 275.

Daehan

Previous: The first difficulty that North Korean defectors experience after resettling in South Korea is...

Revised: The first difficulty that defecting North Korean residents experience after resettling in South Korea is...

Previous: Although the Chang Myeon administration had put forth the policy of unifying the two Koreas by carrying out United Nations-monitored South-North general elections, it did not make active efforts to engage in dialogue with the North.

Revised: Although the Chang Myeon administration had put forth the policy of unifying the two Koreas by carrying out United Nations-monitored South-North general elections, dialogue with the North did not take place.

Chunjae

Previous: Therefore, although North Korea has been relatively better than South Korea at preserving traditional culture, it has not been able to adopt culture and civilization from the developed world.

Revised: Therefore, although it may appear that North Korea has been relatively better than South Korea at preserving traditional culture because it is not as open as South Korea, it has not been able to adopt culture and civilization from the developed advanced world.

Previous: Inter-Korean relations... had acted as a driving force.

Revised: North Korea's terrorist actions had fatal effects on inter-Korean relations.

Previous: Inter-Korean relations cooled down again with the sudden death of Kim Il Sung.

Revised: Inter-Korean relations cooled down again when the inter-Korean summit was cancelled due to the sudden death of Kim Il Sung.

Joongang

Deleted: At present, South and North Korea face many military threats... foreign interference is likely.

Bubmunsa

New addition: Afterwards, the North Korean government made efforts to overcome the serious economic situation through its July 1 economic measures in 2002. Despite these efforts, however, North Korea's economic situation is presently getting worse.

Previous: North Korea-U.S. relations, however, have not seen much progress due to suspicions about North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and the missile development issue. There has been no significant progress in negotiations to normalize relations between North Korea and Japan.

Revised: North Korea-U.S. relations, however, have not seen much progress due to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and the missile development issue. There has been no significant progress in negotiations to normalize relations between North Korea and Japan.

STANTON